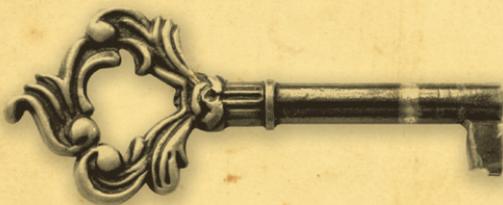


REVISED EDITION

the **five**
dilemmas
of Calvinism



CRAIG R. BROWN

foreword by R.C. Sproul

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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foreword

Any system of doctrine that attempts in the slightest degree to be faithful to Scripture will be difficult to understand. The things of God are deep, challenging matters that require concerted mental labor to master. It is true that the essentials of the gospel are within reach of those who are very young, but as the author of Hebrews points out, “everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice” (Heb. 5:13–14a). In other words, there is much to the Scriptures and the Christian faith beyond what immediately meets the eye, and it is not easy to get at it—“constant practice” is necessary to move from the “unskilled” state to that of “mature” and “trained.” Even Peter acknowledged the difficulty of doctrine when he said of the letters of his colleague Paul, the apostle who, more than any other, laid down the doctrinal

basics of the Christian faith: “There are some things in them that are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16b). He was right. For this reason, I would be suspicious of any doctrinal system I could thoroughly grasp with ease.

Calvinism is certainly no easy system to master. But in addition to being difficult to understand, Calvinism is often the subject of grave *misunderstanding*, simply because it is so counterintuitive and countercultural. As George Whitefield, the evangelist of the Great Awakening, once declared, “We are all Arminians by nature.” Simply put, the tenets of Arminianism taste sweeter to our sinful human natures than those of other doctrinal systems. Not surprisingly, these teachings are affirmed and ingrained in us by the culture and, sadly, by immense segments of the church. Thus, it ought not surprise us that, upon hearing the doctrines of grace for the first time, Arminian Christians often are quick to jump to inaccurate conclusions about the tenets of this system that Calvinists believe most accurately summarizes the teachings of Scripture.

It is at precisely this point that this book you are holding proves its worth to the church—both the Calvinist and Arminian branches. In these pages, Craig Brown battles misunderstandings that have dogged Calvinism for long years. In so doing, he provides apologetic help for Calvinists stymied by the misinformed questions of their Arminian

friends. And, of course, he kindles light for those who have never considered alternatives to the Arminian system.

I think you will find that his book is Scripture-saturated, winsome, and honest. I pray it will be used greatly by the Spirit of God to bring understanding by dispelling misunderstanding.

—R.C. SPROUL
Orlando, Florida
January 2007

introduction

The overriding purpose of this book is to defend the Reformed faith, sometimes known as Calvinism, against some of the misconceptions that have hindered its acceptance by the modern Christian community. As with all misconceptions, there exists a fundamental lack of knowledge concerning the truth about Calvinism. I hope this book can help fill that knowledge gap.

In my defense of the Reformed faith, I will be “the Devil’s advocate” and attack five principles of Calvinism from the standpoint of American “common sense.” I will ask—and hopefully answer—the logical questions that arise in the minds of every student of theology and every Christian as they are confronted with Reformed theology for the first time. I want to show that not only does Calvinism have answers to the five dilemmas I will put forward, it has the only answers that fit with Scripture.

It is my hope that this book will:

1. Comfort those of us who hold to Reformed doctrine but who continually question it because of perceived inconsistencies in it.

2. Challenge those Christians who adhere to Arminian doctrine to look at the Reformed faith with an open mind and attempt to see the consistency of this system and the honor it gives to God.
3. Eliminate the argument of unbelievers that Christianity is a religion of distortions, contradictions, and ritual, and to display the beauty of a totally loving God who has called His people to Himself from the foundation of the world.

I have designed this book to be a simple, easy read for the person who has questions and is struggling to find the answers. Chapters 1 and 2 set the historical and doctrinal foundation for Calvinism. Chapters 3-7 discuss five major dilemmas that confront every Christian who considers the Reformed faith. A suggested list for more detailed reading can be found after the conclusion.

The following passages from the Scriptures give us a foundation for understanding the mysteries of God's sovereignty. I encourage you to meditate on them as you prayerfully consider the information you are about to read.

“God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend.” (Job 37:5)

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. (Ps. 147:5)

“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” (Isa. 46:9b-10)

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isa. 55:8–9)

“Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.” (Jer. 33:3)

“With God all things are possible.” (Matt. 19:26b)

“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” (Acts 1:7b)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and

through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! (Rom. 11:33–36)

We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Cor. 2:7)

It is my hope and prayer that, after reading this book, you will have a truer understanding of the belief system known as Calvinism and a new appreciation for historical Christianity and the truth that can set your mind free. I thank all who take the time to read this book, meditate on its truths, and pray about its conclusions.

—CRAIG BROWN

Charlottesville, Virginia

January 2007



True and false Teaching

What is the historical basis for Reformed theology (Calvinism)?

When you hear the word *doctrine*, what do you think of first? For many, the words *boring* and *unimportant* come to mind. But doctrine is just a way of stating an understanding of what the Bible teaches. In other words, a doctrine is a teaching.

All Christians have doctrines that help to explain what they believe. Reformed Christians are no exception. The doctrines held by Reformed Christians are similar to those of other Christians in some ways and distinctive in others. However, I want to show in these first two chapters that the Reformed faith is closer to the teachings of Jesus and

Paul in the Scriptures than any other form of the Christian religion.

Let me begin with a quick review of church history.

The Bible tells us that the church will always face heresies and needs to be prepared to deal with them. The apostle Peter wrote, “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1).

Unorthodox teachings were not unusual in the first five hundred years after the time of Christ. When such teachings arose, the church recognized its responsibility to investigate them, determine their validity, and state the truth in a clear manner. To accomplish this goal, church councils were called to discuss important subjects. These councils included:

- The Council of Nicaea (AD 325), which proclaimed that Christ is God (the Nicene Creed is recited in many churches).
- The Council of Constantinople (381), which proclaimed that the Holy Spirit is God.
- The Council of Carthage (418), which denounced the Pelagian doctrines of human

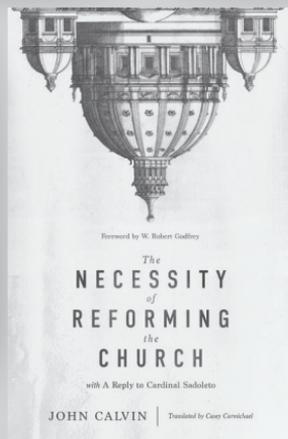
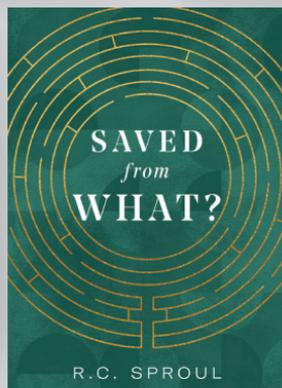
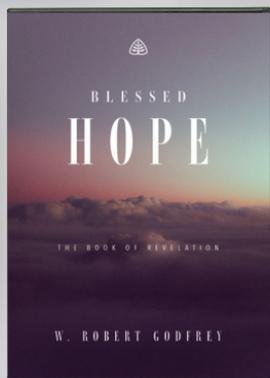
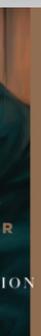
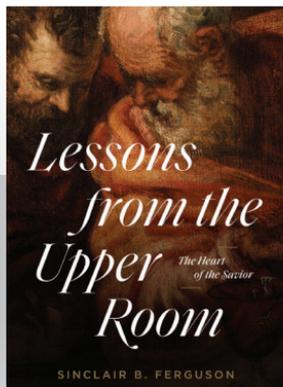
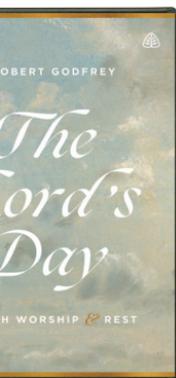
nature, original sin, grace, and perfectibility, and fully approved the views of Augustine.

- The Council of Ephesus (431), which was called to condemn the teaching of Nestorius and confirm that Christ is both God and Man in one nature that is both human and divine. The Virgin Mary was proclaimed to be the “God Bearer.” This council also reiterated the condemnation of Pelagian heretics who had appealed to Nestorius.

The Council of Carthage was called in response to a prominent false teaching known as Pelagianism, named after its founder, Pelagius, a British monk. He denied that the human race fell into original sin with Adam. Babies, he said, are not born corrupt but innocent. They become bad when they grow up, through the bad examples of others. It is their environment that makes them bad, not original sin.

Pelagius was opposed by Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine was the greatest theologian of the early church. He spent much of his life defending the orthodox or true faith against heresies. Fighting these battles helped him codify the doctrines that were taught by Jesus and Paul in the Scriptures.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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